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Street-Ball: The Myth of the Ghetto Basketball Star

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Abstract

In recent decades, countless scholars have examined the developing trend of African American dominance in United States' professional sports. Many have hypothesized that this overrepresentation is caused by the presumed reliance on sports as an avenue out of poverty for the African American youths. This trend, it is believed, has a highly detrimental effect the African American community. In actuality, this argument is flawed because it works under the stereotypical assumption that the overwhelming majority of African Americans come from abject poverty. To dispel this fallacy, the author has analyzed the upbringings of each All-National Basketball League First Team player over the past thirty years. The author discovered that while the majority of the players selected were African American, only a small percentage of these athletes were raised in a poverty-stricken environment. Logically, this would not be the case if poor African Americans relied more heavily on sports than middle-class African Americans. This data proves that stereotypes, not empirical evidence, are the substance of nearly every previous study conducted on the topic.

I. Introduction

Despite comprising only 12 percent of the overall United States' population, African American athletes represented 75 percent of the roster spots in National Basketball Association (NBA) and 67 percent of those in the National Football League (NFL) in 2007.¹ The most prevalent explanation for this phenomenon among scholars and social critics alike is that African American dominance of athletics is caused by the community's reliance on the profession as an avenue out of poverty. The outcome of this dependence, many believe, is that black youths collectively focus too little on developing important educational skills. Presumably, when their potential career in sports inevitably ends before the professional level, these youths are ill-equipped to succeed in the workforce.

This belief is reinforced by popular culture, most notably hip-hop music. For example, rapper Notorious B.I.G. states on his 1994 debut album *Ready to Die* that "because the streets is a short stop/ either you're slingin crack rock or you got a wicked jumpshot/ s--t, it's hard being young from the slums."² Because the Notorious B.I.G. is often viewed as a reliable social critic, this statement evokes a sense of desperation in "the slums" that listeners assume is applicable to the African American community as a whole. Even comedian Bill Cosby has bought into this myth, as is evident in his now infamous statement that black parents believe basketball shoes are a better investment for

¹ Richard Lapchick, "NBA Diversity Makes For a Pretty Big Picture", http://sports.espn.go.com/nba/columns/story?columnist=lapchick_richard&id=2865144, 05/09/2007, Accessed 04/25/2008. & UCF Staff, "UCF Report Card Praises NFL for Progress in Racial Hiring Practices," <http://news.ucf.edu/UCFnews/index?page=article&id=002400412e120743011469b630a70070e7&mode=news>, 09/26/2007, Accessed 04/25/2008.

² Notorious B.I.G., "Things Done Changed", *Ready to Die*, Bad Boy Records, 1994.

their children than is education.³ As a result of these claims, both Caucasians and African Americans appear to have accepted this myth as an irrefutable truth. In reality, the contemporary scholarship and cultural commentary on the topic of African American upward social mobility through sports is not based on careful research or empirical evidence, but on outdated stereotypes and baseless assumptions.

While the conclusion these individuals arrive is accepted by many as fact, it is also subtly racist. Surely some segment of the American populace has become overly dependent upon sports to improve their socio-economic standing, but the assumption that this is a problem that most directly applies to the African American community is a flawed overgeneralization. For those that adhere to this theory, the terms African American and black have evolved into synonyms for poor and destitute. As *Washington Post* columnist Michael Wilbon states, the result of this trend is the “tendency in the media to move black families down a notch in terms of social class.”⁴ This belief has evolved from age-old stereotypes promulgated to justify the institution of slavery and have been reinforced by media coverage of the alleged war on poverty. It has, therefore, become acceptable in both the academic world and the common American household to associate one specific race with a universal crisis.

This statement particularly holds true when analyzing the relationship between race and athletics, as well-respected historians and sociologists completely disregard the overwhelming majority of African Americans that are classified as working-class or

³ Jason B. Johnson, “When lower-class blacks took a hit from Bill Cosby, author Dyson came out swinging in their defense”, *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 7, 2005.

⁴ Michael Wilbon in David Halberstam, *Playing for Keeps: Michael Jordan and the World He Made*. (Random House: New York, 1999), 17.

middle-class.⁵ Rather, the approximately twenty-five percent of impoverished African Americans are chosen to represent an entire race. The logic applied by these individuals is quite simplistic:

Question: Why do African Americans dominate some American sports?

1. Sports is an avenue out of poverty.
2. African Americans are in poverty.
3. Therefore, African Americans must rely on sports as an avenue out of poverty.
4. This overreliance leads to African American dominance in sports, but also decreases African American's presence in other occupational fields.
5. As a result, the African American community is critically harmed by the consequences of this dependence.⁶

The primary flaw in this logic is the assumption that the majority of African Americans are impoverished. In order for this hypothesis to be valid, a preponderance of the African American community would have to live in abject poverty. Otherwise, most would not have to rely on athletics, or any profession, to escape the ghetto. At the very least, most black professional athletes would have to come from difficult backgrounds. If not, upward social mobility out of the lower-class cannot be the driving force behind their success.

Moreover, an impoverished majority would have to exist for the final inference to be justified. If most do not need sports to escape indigence, then it is illogical to conclude that the myth of upward mobility through athletics is a determining factor in

⁵ United States Census Bureau, *Health, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2006*, U.S. Department of Commerce, Accessed 03/12/2008.

⁶ David K. Wiggins, *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in White America*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 220.

African American employment trends. Even if one falsely presumes that every legally impoverished African American relied solely on athletics to improve their life, this fragment of the community could not possibly represent the entire black populace. This argument is even more tenuous because all poor blacks cannot possibly believe that sports will make them wealthy.

Accordingly, the conclusion that a reliance on sports is destroying the fabric of black society is essentially stating that less than one-quarter of the community is dictating the success or failure of every living African American. Although some small fraction of African Americans, along with Caucasians, Hispanics, and Asians, may honestly believe that sports will get them out of poverty, extrapolating this to imply that most African Americans need athletics to help them escape the ghetto is inherently racist. Finally, employment statistics show that the number of African Americans holding elite positions in the legal, medical and academic fields has steadily increased along with black representation in sports. This must immediately cast doubt on the argument that an unsubstantiated reliance on sports has hindered the achievement of blacks in other fields. Rather than relying solely on arcane stereotypes that label African Americans as lazy and indigent, actual evidence must be brought to the scholarly discussion of black social mobility through sports.

II. Previous Research

The existing research on the topic of social mobility for the African American community through sports is quite widely accepted. Fundamentally, historians and sociologists alike contend that athletics did serve as a way of improving socio-economic standing for African Americans in the late 19th century. Following the abolition of

slavery in 1865, there were at least 3.2 million newly freed people that entered the United States workforce.⁷ Most, they claim, were confined to lives of menial labor even after emancipation due to the lack of education they received while under chattel slavery. This group of freedmen comprised 88.1% of the African American population, as only 435,000 blacks were considered free prior to the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment.⁸ According to various scholars, lucrative sports looked down upon by Caucasians were the most feasible avenue to upward mobility for these newly freed people. This position appears logically sound, but it not supported by a great deal of evidence.

The general argument continues by highlighting the progression of the African American athlete from the early 1900's to the modern era. In discussing the late 20th century and early 21st century, the argument further unravels. As the salaries of athletes and percentage of African Americans in sports, namely basketball and football, began to rise, it is believed that more blacks started to look at sports as a way out of poverty. Consequently, other more realistic career aspirations were cast aside, leading to a significant downturn in the development of the African American community. This position is rarely, if ever, supported by empirical evidence. No justifiable surveys are presented and census data is completely disregarded. Rather, anecdotal tales and speculation are used to lend validity to a purely abstract argument based entirely on the assumption that the majority of African Americans are poor.

⁷ United States Census Bureau, 1860, <http://www.census.gov/population/documentation/twps0056/tab01.xls>, 09/13/2002, Accessed 03/12/08.

⁸ United States Census Bureau, 1860.

In *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in White America*, historian David K. Wiggins applies this very approach.⁹ Wiggins argues that at one time, sports did allow elite black athletes to compete with other Americans for social status and equality.¹⁰ This trend of upward mobility developed during the institution of slavery and become prevalent following Reconstruction, as African Americans entered boxing and horse racing.¹¹ These professions were looked down upon by the white establishment because slaves had typically been used as jockeys and fighters for entertainment.¹² Regardless of this stigma, Wiggins believes that the first black professional athletes had significant incomes which allowed them to support their families.¹³ Though this may be true of some freedmen, Wiggins' argument is largely anecdotal and void of any valid statistical data. In fact, history shows that most African Americans relied on education to improve their social standing even in the immediate aftermath of slavery.¹⁴ By 1880, the literacy rate of African Americans increased from 5 percent to 30 percent.¹⁵ By 1990, it had reached 70 percent.¹⁶ With no evidence to show that sports were relied upon by a similarly large percentage of the population, it is obvious that the dependence on athletics for upward social mobility was likely not present even shortly after slavery.

In spite of his lack of valid substantiation, Wiggins again relies on subjective evidence to state that black athletes parlayed their success into connections with powerful

⁹ David K. Wiggins, *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in White America*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 220.

¹⁰ Wiggins, *Glory Bound*, 201.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹² *Ibid.*, 202.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ WGBH, "Reconstruction and Black Education", <http://www.teachersdomain.org/resources/osi04/soc/ush/civil/reconstruction/index.html>, Accessed 04/25/2008.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

white employers that commonly led to property ownership and better lives.¹⁷ For example, he writes that three-time Kentucky Derby winner Isaac Murphy owned real estate from Lexington to Chicago and “Fleetwood Walker,” the first black professional baseball player in the 19th century, was the proprietor of a large hotel and motion picture chain.¹⁸ The fortunate position black athletes held, Wiggins argues, also gave them the opportunity to critique society without the fear of reprisals.¹⁹ Walker, for example, would become a leading figure in the “back to Africa” movement with his 1908 publication *Our Home Colony*.²⁰

By the early 20th century, the owners of many professional sports leagues formed “gentlemen’s agreements” that excluded blacks from competition, forcing the formation of separate organizations.²¹ The Negro Leagues, comprised of various entities including the Eastern Colored League and the National Negro League, are the most well-known of the black professional sports organizations formed during the segregated era.²² Wiggins writes that the “American dream of ultimate possibilities” was destroyed for the black athlete.²³ While Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson were hidden from white America, Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Jesse Owens were thriving in predominantly white sports.²⁴ Although the achievements of these three individuals struck a blow to the premise of white superiority and gave young African Americans hope, the fact that sports were racially segregated in Jim Crow America could not be forgotten.²⁵

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 203.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 204.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 205.

²² *Ibid.*, 206.

²³ *Ibid.*, 205.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 208.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 211.

As the country entered a war against the Nazi “master race ideology,” the barriers to black participation and major sports began to fall.²⁶ Beginning in 1947, Jackie Robinson became the first African American professional baseball player of the modern era, Chuck Cooper and “Sweetwater” Clifton desegregated the NBA and Althea Gibson became the first black Wimbledon champion.²⁷ By the 1960’s, outspoken athletes, such as Cassius Clay and John Carlos, became hero figures for African American youths by celebrating black culture and taking powerful stands on social issues.²⁸

Gradually, a disproportionate number of African Americans in certain sports developed.²⁹ Wiggins believes that this occurred because a rapidly growing number of blacks saw sports as an opportunity for “members of the black community who strive for recognition with the same earnestness as their white counterparts.”³⁰ Allegedly, a great deal of African Americans began to believe in the ideology of social mobility through sports, causing participation to rise and the odds of reaching the professional level to sharply decreased. The result of this supposed trend has been the mounting concern over the negative impact the reliance on sports has on the fabric of the African American community.³¹

At this juncture, the fatal flaw in Wiggins’s thesis is plainly visible. Unlike his historical analysis of the subject, the author fails to supply any evidence to support his position that sports has negatively impacted the African American community. Wiggins’ argument that an increased percentage of blacks began to rely on athletics to improve

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ William Marcus Leonard II, *A Sociological Perspective of Sport*, (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co).

²⁸ David K. Wiggins, *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in White America*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 214.

²⁹ Wiggins, *Glory Bound*, 220.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 220.

³¹ *Ibid.*

their social standing is purely speculative. Far worse, he's assuming that African Americans *need* a way out of poverty. He ignores easily accessible information from the United States Census Bureau, which states that in 2006, 24.4% of the African American population was legally impoverished.³² This equated to only 8.54 million of the 35 million living African Americans.³³ Comparatively, there are over 9.3 million poor whites in the United States.³⁴ Despite this data, Wiggins' implies that poverty is just a black problem.

In *Fair and Foul: Beyond the Myths and Paradoxes of Sport*, D. Stanley Eitzen presents an argument similar to that of David K. Wiggins.³⁵ The author holds the same position as Wiggins, but expands upon it by attempting to present statistical evidence that allegedly attests to the argument's validity. Eitzen begins his discussion of the issue by stating that the concept of upward social mobility dictates that all Americans must aspire to a higher position in society.³⁶ While most firmly believe that the United States is a meritocratic society, Eitzen argues that upward social mobility is "largely a myth".³⁷ The author supports his preliminary thesis by citing research conducted by Greg Duncan which found that the degree of social mobility has slowed in the late 20th century.³⁸ This can be attributed to the decreasing size of the middle class and to the polarization of wealth and poverty.³⁹ Furthermore, Eitzen believes that race and gender will continue to

³² United States Census Bureau, *Health, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2006*, U.S. Department of Commerce, Accessed 03/12/2008.

³³ United States Census Bureau, *Health Poverty, and Insurance Coverage*, 2006.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ D. Stanley Eitzen. *Fair and Foul: Beyond the Myths and Paradoxes of Sport*. (Lanham: Rowman Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 1999).

³⁶ D. Stanley Eitzen, *Fair and Foul*, 111.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

be important issues, as “white males have higher pay and higher status jobs...than racial minorities even when their parents have similar status.”⁴⁰

The prevalence of the upward social mobility myth, Eitzen continues, is directly leading to the destruction of the African American community. The author basis his conclusion on the supposition that athletics is the one occupation that most African Americans feel they have a better opportunity to succeed at than their Caucasian counterparts. Eitzen cites the astounding financial success of black athletes Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, and Mike Tyson, who grossed a combined \$210 million in 1997, has led African American youths to view sports as “an important avenue out of the ghetto.”⁴¹ Eitzen asserts that by attempting to use sports as a way out, the African American community relies on a false premise and furthers their dependence on “whites and white institutions.”⁴² Even more blatantly than Wiggins, Eitzen relies on arcane stereotypes that lead to gross generalizations. Rather than formulating an argument after conducting careful research, it appears that the author assumed that his thesis was correct and only sought data that would justify his conclusion.

Eitzen’s argument is most evidently flawed in the bevy of either erroneous or ineffectual statistics he presents to justify his thesis. First, the author attacks the claim that the free education provided to college athletes gives poor youth’s job opportunities they would not otherwise receive.⁴³ In response, Eitzen argues that sport neither provides a free education for a significant number of athletes nor leads to better job

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 134.

opportunities.⁴⁴ He writes that of all college athletes in 1993, only 15 percent to 20 percent receive full scholarships and 15 percent to 25 percent received partial scholarships.⁴⁵ Eitzen believes that most young athletes presume that a large number of college athletes receive financial assistance, but again provides no data to support his claim.⁴⁶ If most do not believe they will receive full-scholarships, this information is irrelevant.

Additionally, Eitzen states that relatively few African American college athletes actually graduate.⁴⁷ According to his research, only 45 percent of African American college football players and 39 percent of basketball players receive their degrees.⁴⁸ This phenomenon, the author believes, occurs because student-athletes are forced to take easy classes that make unrealistic goal in order to remain eligible.⁴⁹ Not only is this a sweeping statement that fails to differentiate between universities, but the statistics Eitzen's cites are now obsolete. Though his article was written in 1999, the author appears to cite data from the 1980s. Recent studies actually conclude that 73% of African American female and 54% of African American male college-athletes graduate, marking a dramatic increase since 1984.⁵⁰ In fact, these figures are very similar to those of Caucasian college athletes, who graduate at 73% and 66%, respectively.

The crux of Eitzen's argument is the relationship he illustrates between the limited opportunities in professional sports and the large number of youths that wish to hold these jobs. The authors states that of the approximately 40,000 African American

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Associate Press, "Study: Black Athlete Graduation Rate up 24 Percent", 04/06/2006, Accessed: 03/13/2008.

boys who play high school basketball, only “thirty-five will make the NBA and only seven will be starters”.⁵¹ Despite this bleak reality, “two-thirds of African American boys believe they can become professional athletes”.⁵² Countless other researchers, namely William Marcus Leonard and George H. Sage, make the same statistically based assertion.⁵³ Each author believes that the inevitable result of this imbalance is the complete failure of those who do not achieve their goal.

This conclusion is both unverified and foolish. Eitzen never defines the age range of the boys surveyed and his results are hardly convincing. Most adolescents dream of emulating their role models, regardless of how unlikely the attainment of that goal may be. Becoming a rock-star, actor, astronaut, or professional athlete are among the ten most popular aspirations of American children, but this does not mean that these goals are unalterable and that children will pursue such fantasies their entire lives.⁵⁴ From this horribly flawed connection, Eitzen infers that an overreliance on athletes to escape the ghetto will further plunge African Americans into poverty. Again, he does not give any statistical data to justify the supposed association between the African American community and poverty, but does state that sports are believed to be an escape from a life of crime, poverty, and despair because there are few other opportunities for black middle-

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁵² D. Stanley Eitzen, *Fair and Foul: Beyond the Myths and Paradoxes of Sport*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), 111.

⁵³ William Marcus Leonard II, *A Sociological Perspective of Sport*, (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co).

⁵⁴ David E. Ewalt. *When I Grow Up: Kid's Dream Jobs Salaries*. http://www.forbes.com/2007/10/09/kids-dream-jobs-ent-dream1007-cx_de_1009salary.html?feed=rss_news. 10/09/07. Accessed 03/13/2008.

class success.⁵⁵ In light of the fact that over three-quarters of African Americans are considered middle-class, this conclusion is wholly unfounded.⁵⁶

Other publications, such as Terry Bledsoe's *Black Dominance: Strictly from Hunger* rely exclusively on anecdotal evidence. Bledsoe believes that the large African American presence in major American sports has caused the black community to depend on athletics as a "gateway...into Establishment Life."⁵⁷ Written decades before *Fair and Foul: Beyond the Myths and Paradoxes*, *Black Dominance: Strictly from Hunger* attempts to give a more detailed analysis of how this phenomenon has affected various races and ethnicities throughout the 20th century.⁵⁸ Bledsoe cites novelist Budd Schulberg who describes sports, notably boxing, as "a noble succession of the downtrodden."⁵⁹ Schulberg writes in *The Harder They Fall* that "when the waves of Irish immigration were breaking over American...the sons of Erin monopoliz[ed] the titles and glory."⁶⁰ "Gradually" Schulberg continues, "as the Irish settled down to being politicians, policemen, judges, the Shamrock had to make room for the Star of David...and then came the Italians."⁶¹ Finally, "the Negroes press forward, hungry for the money, prestige, and opportunity denied to them at almost every door."⁶²

⁵⁵D. Stanley Eitzen, *Fair and Foul: Beyond the Myths and Paradoxes of Sport*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), 137.

⁵⁶ United States Census Bureau, *Health, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2006*, U.S. Department of Commerce, Accessed 03/12/2008.

⁵⁷ Terry Bledsoe, *Black Dominance of Sports: Strictly from Hunger* in *Sports in Contemporary American Society*, comp. by D. Stanley Eitzen (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 360.

⁵⁸ Bledsoe, *Black Dominance of Sports*, 360.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 360.

⁶⁰ Bud Schulberg in Terry Bledsoe, *Black Dominance of Sports: Strictly from Hunger* in *Sports in Contemporary American Society*, comp. by D. Stanley Eitzen (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 360.

⁶¹ Bud Schulberg in Bledsoe, *Black Dominance of Sports*, 360.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 360.

Like these other oppressed immigrant groups, Bledsoe argues that the unavailability most jobs has been a source of “bitterness and frustration” to blacks.⁶³ This aggravation causes African Americans to strive for the few occupations they believe are available, the most visible of which is professional athletics. James Baldwin once wrote that “Every Negro boy” must find “a thing, a gimmick, to lift him out, to start him on his way.”⁶⁴ For far too many black youths, Bledsoe states, “the gimmick has been sports.”⁶⁵ According to the author, the unavoidable result of this false belief is that innumerable blacks who hoped of achieving excellence in sports fell short and had no other paths to follow. While these statements may accurately depict the experience of some, assuming the same is true for most African Americans is illogical and ignorant. As Wiggins’ states, blacks may have needed sports to improve their standing during Reconstruction, but both authors are wrong though when they assume that they financial status of African Americans is the same today as it was 150 years ago. Moreover, Bledsoe implies that a great number of Irish, Jewish and Italian Americans used sports to enter the middle-class in the early 20th century. In reality, far more Irish Americans, for example, used municipal jobs than boxing to improve their economic standing.⁶⁶ This same flawed logic is used today to claim that African Americans rely on sports as a way out of poverty, when far more black youths actually rely on education.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ James Baldwin in Terry Bledsoe, *Black Dominance of Sports: Strictly from Hunger in Sports in Contemporary American Society*, comp. by D. Stanley Eitzen (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 359.

⁶⁵ James Baldwin in Terry Bledsoe, *Black Dominance of Sports*, 359.

⁶⁶ Joel Wendland, “Bill O’Reilly’s Racist Distortion of History”, <http://www.africaspeaks.com/articles/2005/1810.html>, 10/08/2005, Accessed 04/27/2008.

Another article that uses this subjective approach is John C. Gatson's "The Destruction of the Young Black Male: The Impact of Popular Culture and Organized".⁶⁷ Gatson argues that the modern black male find himself "on a fantasy island lacking the skills necessary to propel himself into the flow of mainstream America."⁶⁸ This occurs because professional sports are perceived as being the shortcut American upper-class and ensuing high degree of social acceptance.⁶⁹ The media portrays the achievement of this goal as far more practical as becoming a surgeon, but Gatson states that a child is much more likely to become a doctor if an equal amount of time were dedicated to this pursuit.⁷⁰

The implication behind this statement is that most African American children believe they are more likely to become a professional athlete than to receive a medical degree. The author fails to support this statement with any statistical data and refuses to acknowledge the fact that there are exponentially more African-Americans holding professional degrees than professional athletes.⁷¹ While there are only approximately 3,500 professional athletes in the United States, there are 166,000 African Americans who hold law, business or medical degrees. The majority of these individuals are black men. Moreover, 113,000 African Americans hold Doctoral Degrees and 4,252,000 have graduated from a four-year college.

⁶⁷ John C. Gatson, "The Destruction of the Young Black Male: The Impact of Popular Culture and Organized Sports", *Teaching Sociology*, 23 (Oct. 1995): 389-395.

⁶⁸ Gatson, "The Destruction of the Young Black Male", 371.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 376.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ "Sound the Trumpets: For the First Time, More Than Four Million African Americans Now Hold a Four Year College Degree", *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, Winter 2007/2008, 16.

Additionally, African American enrollment in law school has tripled over the last 30 years, as nearly 3,000 new J.D.s are now awarded to African Americans annually.⁷² The percentage of African Americans holding graduate or professional degrees has nearly quadrupled since 1990 as well, along with an increased black high school graduate rate.⁷³ Finally, the black-white parity in higher education has dramatically increased since the beginning of black dominance in sports, leading to a ever-growing number of African Americans in academia.⁷⁴ After reviewing these figures, it becomes clear that the African American community does not view professional sports as the most practical occupation. Rather, black representation in sports has increased alongside the community's expanding presence in other elite professional fields.

The only evidence Gatson does provide is a poem that he wrote. The author states that his work, entitled "I'm Going to the NBA", expresses the typical view that leads to this overreliance on professional sports:

"Hey, I'm sorry Miss Teacher,
I don't have time to stay after school for no help today.
I've got to go practice...
Cause I'm on my way to the NBA..."⁷⁵

The poem concludes:

"What do you mean *IF* I don't make it?
Hey Teach, I GOTTA MAKE IT to the NBA!...
Cause, PLAYING BASKETBALL IS *ALL* I KNOW HOW TO DO".⁷⁶

⁷² American Bar Association, Legal Education Statistics: African American J.D. Enrollment, 1971-2005, <http://www.abanet.org/legaled/statistics/charts/stats%20-%2013.pdf>.

⁷³ Theodore Cross, ed., "Vital Signs: The Statistics that Describe the Present and Suggest the Future of African Americans in Higher Education", *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, Spring 2006, 49.

⁷⁴ Theodore Cross, "Vital Signs", *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 48.

⁷⁵ John C. Gatson, "The Destruction of the Young Black Male: The Impact of Popular Culture and Organized Sports", *Teaching Sociology*, 23 (Oct. 1995): 379.

⁷⁶ Gatson, "The Destruction of the Young Black Male", 379.

According to Gatson, this narrow-minded outlook has caused sports to become a “rite of passage for young black males.”⁷⁷ Since many school-age children focus on basketball or football as a career, education has become “the first leg on their journey to the NBA”.⁷⁸ Parents and coaches push this dream, causing youths to overlook the fact that reaching the professional level is almost a statistical impossibility.⁷⁹ For this very reason, Gatson states that hoop dreams, aspirations of a better life through sports, are destroying the African American community. While some children may suffer this fate, implying that it is a widespread epidemic without providing any statistical backing is irresponsible scholarship.

Gatson closes by stating that blacks may be overrepresented on the football fields, but do not own any of the teams or buildings in which the games are played.⁸⁰ The author’s attempt to downplay the financial success of the African American community is quite misleading, as there were several black team owners at the time this article was written. Six years before the publication of “The Destruction of the Young Black Male”, Harvard Law graduate Peter Bynoe became the first African American minority owner of an NBA franchise when his investment group purchased the Denver Nuggets.⁸¹ Additionally, NFL Hall-of-Famer Deron Cherry principle owner of the Jacksonville Jaguars in 1994 and BET owner Robert Johnson became the majority owner of the expansion Charlotte Bobcats in 2002.⁸² Since Johnson’s purchase, high-profile members

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 376.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 380.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 381.

⁸¹ Interview with Peter Bynoe, http://www.thehistorymakers.com/programs/dvl/files/Bynoe_Peter.xml. Conducted: March 28, 2004.

⁸² Rutgers University, Success Stories: Deron Cherry, <http://admissions.rutgers.edu/100x.asp?id=21&SFORA=A> & “Johnson Will Become NBA’s First Black

of the African American community, such as Michael Jordan, Earvin “Magic” Johnson, Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter, Nelly and Usher Raymond have also purchased stakes in NBA franchises.⁸³

Finally, the anecdotal nature of literature and popular culture has significantly contributed to the prevalence of the “rhymn’ or ballin’” myth. For example, Clay Goss’ play *On Being Hit* records the life of a former black boxer that dedicated his entire life to winning a championship.⁸⁴ Now a struggling janitor who is dying of a kidney disorder that stemmed from his boxing career, Holly can only dream of the title that he never won.⁸⁵ Goss’ piece is intended to depict the challenges that face those in the African American community that believe sports will dramatically improve their livelihood. In addition, Hollywood films and the lyrics of rap artists have spread the belief that African Americans must either excel athletically or sell drugs in order to escape poverty. Various movies, such as *Hoop Dreams*, *He Got Game*, *Sunset Park*, *Above the Rim*, and *Heaven is a Playground*, portray black characters as impoverished and subjugated by society. In a statement similar to the sentiments expressed by the Notorious B.I.G., Denzel Washington asserts in *He Got Game* that the only plausible route out of the projects for these young men is for their parents to “put a ball in the crib.”⁸⁶

Each of these sources, while harmless at first glance, are based on racist ideals. The belief that African Americans need athletics to escape the ghetto implies that an overwhelming majority of the community is living in destitution. While academics and

Majority Owner”, ESPN, <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/print?id=1478643&type=news>. 12/17/2002., Accessed: 03/13/2008.

⁸³ Latif Lewis, “Nelly Claims Stake in Charlotte Bobcats”, <http://www.blackenterprise.com/cms/exclusivesopen.aspx?id=815&p=0>. 07/20/04, Accessed 03/13/2008.

⁸⁴ Lloyd W. Brown, “The Black Literary Experience” in *American Sports Culture: The Humanist Dimensions*, edited by Wiley Lee Umphlett, (London: Associated University Press, 1985), 246.

⁸⁵ Brown. “The Black Literary Experience”. 246.

⁸⁶ Spike Lee, *He Got Game*, 1998.

laymen alike are haphazardly willing to cosign this notion, statistical evidence proves otherwise. Additionally, in order for this myth to be accurate, a majority of black professional athletes would have to come from poor socio-economic backgrounds. Rationally, if most African Americans are playing sports because they need to escape poverty, then a disproportionate percentage of black athletes would have to come from this type of environment. None of the previous scholarship has attempted to conduct such a study, either because doing so would be too tedious or possibly because the results would weaken their hypothesis.

III. Context of the Problem

The existing hypothesis implies that a majority of African Americans live in utter poverty. This false assumption is then used to prove that a significant percentage of the African American community relies on sports to improve their financial standing. Not only is the premise of this logic inaccurate, but there is no empirical evidence to support the conclusion. For the argument to stand, athletes that rose from impoverished origins must be overrepresented in professional sports. Yet the previous academic literature fails to provide any legitimate data regarding the socio-economic background of late 20th and early 21st century professional athletes. At best, these publications use anecdotal facts to assert that one athlete may have had a particularly trying childhood. This type of information lends absolutely nothing to the contemporary discussion of upward social mobility through sports. It is wholly subjective and untrustworthy, but appears to be the only manner in which the topic has been approached.

IV. Methods

To combat this disturbing argument, one must use an objective, unbiased sample that accurately represents the larger population of professional athletes. The most efficient way to do so is to choose a pre-selected group of athletes from an African American dominated sport. Since there is limited information about the upbringings of most professional basketball or football players, a truly random sample is not possible, as. The only way to conduct this type of research, outside of an extending interviewing process, is to use a group of highly publicized athletes that have already been assembled together by a third party.

One set that fits these criteria is the All-NBA First-Team, which consists of five players from National Basketball Association that are chosen each season as the league's finest.⁸⁷ Because they are the NBA's usually most popular athletes, their biographical information is readily available. Over the last twenty-years, there have been one-hundred All-NBA First Team selections.⁸⁸ Several players were chosen multiple times, which accounts for a total of thirty-three different All-NBA First-Team selections since the 1987-1988 season.⁸⁹ Of these athletes, twenty-five were African American and six were Caucasian. Biographical information on each of the twenty-five African American athletes was collected and synthesized.⁹⁰

The federal poverty guideline was then used to establish the United States' poverty threshold, which is set at a household income of between \$17,000 and \$24,000 per year for an average sized family of two to four people.⁹¹ The upper threshold equates

⁸⁷ National Basketball Association, All-NBA Teams, http://www.nba.com/history/awards_allnba.html, Accessed: 10/13/2007.

⁸⁸ National Basketball Association, All-NBA Teams, 10/13/1007.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Federal Register*, Vol. 72, No. 15, January 24, 2007, pp. 3147–3148 & United States Census Bureau. United States: Fact Sheet, Census 2000, Demographic Profile,

to a full-time, hourly wage of approximately \$11.50 for a single income family and \$5.75 for a family with two incomes. Basically, nearly every family in which even one parent is employed full-time will exceed this limit. Therefore, an athlete was not considered impoverished if one of his family members maintained full-time occupation for the better portion of the athlete's youth. In order for the previous scholars' hypothesis to be valid, most African American All-NBA First-Team players must have been raised in families that do not appear to meet this threshold. At the very least, a significantly greater percentage of the test group athletes must have been raised in such families at a higher rate than the larger African American population. If neither can be found, concluding that an escape from poverty is at the root of these athletes' desire to play professionally is unfounded because most were never impoverished.

V. Data

1. **Kobe Bryant** (2001/2002-2003/2004, 2006/2007): As the son of a professional basketball player, Los Angeles Lakers shooting-guard Kobe Bryant led a privileged childhood.⁹² His father, "Jellybean" Joe Bryant, played eight seasons in the NBA beginning in 1976.⁹³ As a result, the Bryant family never struggled financially.⁹⁴ Joe Bryant joined the Italian Professional League in 1984, moving his wife and children to Europe where they would spend seven years.⁹⁵ Kobe

http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/SAFFFacts?geo_id=&_geoContext=&_street=&_county=&_cityTown=&_state=&_zip=&_lang=en&_sse=on. Accessed 03/13/2008.

⁹² Mark Stewart, *Kobe Bryant: Bio*, http://www.jockbio.com/Bios/Bryant/Bryant_bio.html, Accessed 02/11/08.

⁹³ Stewart, *Bryant*, 02/11/08.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

- eventually returned to his native Philadelphia to play high school basketball before reaching the NBA.⁹⁶
2. **Tim Duncan** (1997/1998-2004/2005, 2006/2007): San Antonio Spurs power-forward Tim Duncan grew up in the U.S. Virgin Islands, where he excelled as a swimmer.⁹⁷ Following a destructive hurricane, his town's pool was ruined and Tim was forced to take up basketball instead.⁹⁸ Tim's mother died when he was 14 years old, but his father's successful masonry business easily supported the family.⁹⁹ The Duncan's are described as being better off "than most" on the small island, allowing one to infer that they were financially stable and firmly middle-class.¹⁰⁰
 3. **Amare Stoudomire** (2006/2007): Phoenix Suns center Amare Stoudomire had a very tumultuous childhood in the downtrodden community of Lake Wales, Florida.¹⁰¹ The Stoudomire's ran a successful company, but Amare's father died suddenly when Amare was 12 years old and the company fell into disarray.¹⁰² Amare's mother had a trouble adjusting to life after the loss and resorted to heavy drug-use, leading to several incarcerations. Faced with the burden of supporting

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Mark Stewart, *Tim Duncan: Bio*, http://www.jockbio.com/Bios/Duncan/Duncan_bio.html, Accessed 02/11/08.

⁹⁸ Stewart, *Duncan*, 02/11/08.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Mark Stewart, *Amare Stoudomire: Bio*, http://www.jockbio.com/Bios/Stoudemire/Stoudemire_bio.html, Accessed 02/11/08.

¹⁰² Stewart, *Stoudomire*, 02/11/08.

his family, Amare opted out of attending college and declared for the NBA draft directly after high school.

4. **Lebron James** (2005/2006): Cleveland Cavaliers' small-forward Lebron James was raised by his single mother in Akron, Ohio.¹⁰³ Although Lebron's biological father had little impact on his life, Lebron did have a father-figure in his mother's long-time boyfriend, Eddie Jackson.¹⁰⁴ More importantly, youth football coach Frank Walker provided a great deal of support for Lebron and his family.¹⁰⁵ When his mother was going through a particularly difficult time-period, Lebron moved in with the Walkers, who provided Lebron the stability he needed to mature.¹⁰⁶ Although Lebron later returned to his mother's household, the financially secure Walker family made sure that Lebron was never in need.¹⁰⁷

5. **Shaquille O'Neal** (1997/1998, 1999/2000-2995/200): Phoenix Suns Center Shaquille O'Neal was born to Lucille O'Neal and Joe Toney in Newark, New Jersey in 1972.¹⁰⁸ Joe left the family shortly after Shaquille's birth, but Lucille married a city-employee named Philip Harrison.¹⁰⁹ Although both parents had steady salaries, Philip sought a higher paying position in the U.S. Army.¹¹⁰ The family moved frequently because of Philip's military career, yet Shaquille's

¹⁰³ Mark Stewart, *Lebron James: Bio*, http://www.jockbio.com/Bios/James/James_bio.html, Accessed 02/11/08.

¹⁰⁴ Stewart, *James*, 02/11/08.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Josepha Sherman, *Shaquille O'Neal: Basketball Superstar*. (Mitchell Lane Publishers: Hockessin, Delaware, 2005), 9.

¹⁰⁹ Sherman, *Shaquille O'Neal*, 9.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

mother and step-father appear to have paid considerable attention to his development.¹¹¹ From all accounts, Shaquille's childhood was positive and lacked any substantial hardship.¹¹²

6. **Allen Iverson** (1998/1999, 2000/2001, 2004/2005): Denver Nuggets' guard Allen Iverson was raised under difficult circumstances in Hampton, VA. Ann Iverson had her son when she was only fifteen years old and Allen's biological father left shortly afterwards.¹¹³ When Iverson was a toddler, Ann's boyfriend, Michael Freeman, supported the family while working in a Norfolk shipyard.¹¹⁴ Iverson has stated that the power to his home was shut-off several times during his early years and that a pipe once broke, spilling sewage into his apartment.¹¹⁵ Despite these setbacks, Ann Iverson instilled a sense of optimism in all of her children and convinced them that success was never out of reach.¹¹⁶ The Iverson's financial status appeared to improve over time, as Ann was able to purchase Air Jordan sneakers for Allen and enroll him in various basketball camps.¹¹⁷

This positive trend came to an abrupt end in 1990, when Iverson's brother Tony was murdered and Freeman was incarcerated for life after being convicted on a drug-related offence.¹¹⁸ Similar to LeBron James, Iverson moved in with his

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Mark Stewart, *Allen Iverson: Bio*, http://www.jockbio.com/Bios/James/James_bio.html, Accessed 02/11/08.

¹¹⁴ Stewart, *Iverson*, 02/11/08.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

football coach, Gary Moore, when finances were strained.¹¹⁹ Moore pushed Iverson into a strict studying and training regime, making Allen a far more responsible individual.¹²⁰ Iverson returned to his family home when his mother obtained a full-time job, but tragedy soon followed.¹²¹

On February 13, 1993, Iverson was wrongfully accused of taking part in a mêlée at a local bowling alley.¹²² Although the high school senior never threw a punch, a group of white youths testified that Iverson had been the primary aggressor.¹²³ He was sentenced to five years in prison after a nationally-televised trial, but the Governor Douglas Wilder pardoned the two-sport star after uncovering the trial's racial bias.¹²⁴ The incident caused Iverson to rapidly mature and would become the driving force behind his eventual success.¹²⁵

7. **Kevin Garnett (2002/2003-2003/2004):** Boston Celtics forward Kevin Garnett was born to Shirley Garnett and O'Lewis McCullough in Greenville, SC.¹²⁶ Shirley worked both at a local factory and as a hair stylist, while O'Lewis remarried and supported Kevin financially.¹²⁷ Shirley, a practicing Jehovah's Witness, married Ernest Irby when Kevin was 13 years old.¹²⁸ Shirley moved the

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Mark Stewart, *Kevin Garnett: Bio*, http://www.jockbio.com/Bios/James/James_bio.html, Accessed 02/11/08.

¹²⁷ Stewart, *Garnett*, 02/11/08.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

family to the “middle class” suburb of Mauldin, where she opened her own hair-dressing business.

The couple demanded excellence from Kevin and refused to allow sports to shadow academics, but an incident eerily similar to Iverson’s legal troubles tarnished Garnett’s once flawless reputation.¹²⁹ When violence broke out between several of Kevin’s white and black classmates, law enforcement arrested every student in the vicinity.¹³⁰ Facing charges of second-degree lynching, the Garnett’s moved to Chicago to avoid the intense media attention and enrolled Kevin at Farragut High School.¹³¹ The charges were eventually dropped and Kevin maintained a 3.8 grade point average at Farragut, but chose to enter the NBA draft rather than attend college.¹³²

8. **Tracy McGrady** (2001/2002-2002/2003): Houston Rockets forward Tracy McGrady was raised in the largely white community of Auburndale, FL.¹³³ Although one of his childhood friends was murdered in the area, Auburndale was hardly a dangerous environment.¹³⁴ Tracy lived comfortably in the small town, where his mother, Roberta, and grand-mother shared the responsibility of caring for him.¹³⁵ While the family was far from wealthy, Tracy was always supplied with the newest clothing and footwear.¹³⁶ Tracy’s biological father, Melanise

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Mark Stewart, *Tracy McGrady: Bio*, http://www.jockbio.com/Bios/James/James_bio.html, Accessed 02/11/08.

¹³⁴ Stewart, *McGrady*, 02/11/08.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

Williford, was not a daily part of his life, but was interested in his “welfare”.¹³⁷

Moreover, Tracy’s many relatives substantially helped Roberta and gave Tracy in excess of \$100 every year for his birthday.¹³⁸

9. **Jason Kidd** (1998/1999-2001/2002, 2003/2004): Dallas Mavericks’ guard Jason Kidd grew up in Alameda, an affluent suburb of San Francisco and Oakland.¹³⁹ Jason’s father Steve began his career as a TWA baggage handler, but gradually rose to a lucrative supervisor’s position.¹⁴⁰ His mother, Anne, was a computer programmer for Bank of America.¹⁴¹ Money was never an issue for the Kidd’s; the family owned three horses and was able to send their children to elite private high schools.¹⁴²

10. **Chris Webber** (2000-2001): Golden State Warriors forward Chris Webber was raised in a “lower middle-class” neighborhood of Detroit, Michigan.¹⁴³ Both parents were gainfully employed, his father as a plant foreman for General Motors and his mother as a special education teacher.¹⁴⁴ Though there were difficult sections of the city, Chris’ strong family kept him out of what his father referred to as any “poor environments”.¹⁴⁵ The Webber household was a warm

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Mark Stewart, *Jason Kidd: Bio*, http://www.jockbio.com/Bios/James/James_bio.html, Accessed 02/11/08.

¹⁴⁰ Stewart, *Kidd*, 02/11/08.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ Mitch Album, *Fab Five: Basketball, Trash Talk, the American Dream*, (Warner Brothers, Inc.: New York, 1993), 53.

¹⁴⁴ Album, *Fab Five*, 53.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

and loving, as Chris' friends would often tease him by referring to his family as the "Brady Bunch" and the "Walton's."¹⁴⁶

- 11. Gary Payton** (1997/1998, 1999/2000): Former Seattle Supersonics point guard Gary Payton was born into an underprivileged section of Oakland, California, where he lived for the first ten years of his life.¹⁴⁷ The Payton's were forced to deal with street fights and gunshots in East Oakland, but Gary was far too young to understand the tumultuous world surrounding him.¹⁴⁸ Eventually the family moved to a "good...safe" neighborhood in East Oakland, which Gary describes as the "shiny" section of town.¹⁴⁹ Although his parents both worked long-hours, it appears that Gary lived the latter portion of his childhood in relative comfort.¹⁵⁰
- 12. Karl Malone** (1988/1989-1998/1999): Utah Jazz forward Karl Malone grew up as one of nine children in rural Summerfield, LA.¹⁵¹ His mother, Shirley Tucker, worked numerous jobs, including picking cotton and killing chickens, to supply for her large family.¹⁵² She was forced to do so by herself, after Karl's father committed suicide.¹⁵³ Shirley was clearly a hard-worker and received welfare support, but Karl and his siblings certainly lacked the luxuries of an average middle-class American household.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Gary Payton with Greg Brown, *Gary Payton: Confidence Counts*, (Taylor Publishing: Dallas, TX, 1999), 6.

¹⁴⁸ Payton. *Gary Payton*. 8.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵¹ Clay Latimer, *Special Delivery: The Amazing Basketball Career of Karl Malone*, (Addax Publishing Group: Lenexa, KS., 1999), 21.

¹⁵² Latimer, *Special Delivery*, 21.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 21.

13. **Grant Hill** (1995/1997): Phoenix Suns forward Grant Hill was born into affluence as the only child of a highly successful Reston, Va. family.¹⁵⁴ Grant's father, Calvin, is an Ivy League graduate that went on to play the Dallas Cowboys in the early 1970s.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, Grant's mother, Janet, attended Wellesley College and shared a dorm room with current Democratic Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.¹⁵⁶ After completing her graduate degree at the University of Chicago, Janet opened a financial consulting firm in Washington, DC with former Secretary of the U.S. Army, Clifford Alexander.¹⁵⁷ The Hill's wealth allowed Grant to receive a diverse education at elite institutions, as well as extended trips to Egypt and Great Britain.¹⁵⁸ Janet and Calvin also kept close social acquaintances with top political figures and hall-of-famers, such as Roger Staubach who gave Grant his name.¹⁵⁹

14. **Alonzo Mourning** (1998/1999): Miami Heat center Alonzo Mourning spent the majority of his youth in a foster home run by Fannie Theet.¹⁶⁰ Given the decision to live with either his mother or father following a difficult divorce, Mourning could not choose and rather decided on living with 9 other foster children in the Theet household.¹⁶¹ Though the transition was challenging for Mourning, the

¹⁵⁴ Bill Gutman, *Grant Hill: A Biography*, (Pocket Books: New York. 1997), 3.

¹⁵⁵ Gutman, *Grant Hill*, 3.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶⁰ Foster Club, http://www.fosterclub.com/funstuff/fam_fosterKids/alonzoMourning.cfm, Accessed 04/28/2008.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Theet's love and compassion allowed him to excel both athletically and academically.¹⁶² According to Mourning, Mrs. Theet guided him throughout his childhood with the adage "You can do it."¹⁶³

15. Michael Jordan (1987/1988-1992/1993, 1995/1996-1997/1998): Chicago Bulls guard Michael Jordan was born in Brooklyn, New York, but moved with his family to Wilmington, North Carolina before entering elementary school.¹⁶⁴ Jordan's family has often been described as a "solid...middle class, black family", but *Washington Post* columnist Michael Wilbon writes that the Jordan's were actually upper-middle class.¹⁶⁵ Michael's father, James Jordan, was a retired member of the United States Air Force and a successful department supervisor at General Electric.¹⁶⁶ His mother, Deloris, is a graduate of the Tuskegee Institute that worked at a local bank.¹⁶⁷ The family's three incomes, including James' military pension, allowed the Jordan's to live a comfortable life and prevented Michael from seeking employment as a youth.¹⁶⁸

16. Hakeem Olajuwon (1987/1988-1988/1989, 1992/1993-1993/1994, 1996/1997):

Houston Rockets Center Hakeem Olajuwon was born to a financial stable family

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ David Halberstam, *Playing for Keeps: Michael Jordan and the World He Made*, (Random House: New York, 1999), 17.

¹⁶⁵ Michael Wilbon in David Halberstam, *Playing for Keeps: Michael Jordan and the World He Made*. (Random House: New York., 1999), 17.

¹⁶⁶ David Halberstam, *Playing for Keeps: Michael Jordan and the World He Made*, (Random House: New York, 1999), 17.

¹⁶⁷ Halberstam. *Playing for Keeps*. 17.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

in Lagos, Nigeria.¹⁶⁹ Hakeem’s parents, Salaam and Abike Olajuwon, owned a small business and lived in the Surulere section of Lagos, home to the cities middle class.¹⁷⁰ Though the unemployment rate in Lagos is roughly forty percent, the family is described as “well-to-do people” that were sure to stress the importance of a diverse education to their six children.¹⁷¹ Consequently, Hakeem was raised speaking six different languages, maintained no worse than a *B* average throughout his education career, and played numerous sports.¹⁷²

17. **Tim Hardaway** (1996/1997): Miami Heat guard Tim Hardaway grew up in Chicago, Illinois, where he was raised in large part by his grandmother, Minnie E. Eubanks.¹⁷³ Tim’s parents divorced when he was eleven years old, pushing him away toward the compassionate Eubanks.¹⁷⁴ Tim was under the legal custody of his mother, a mail carrier, but also spent a significant amount of time with his father.¹⁷⁵ Donald Hardaway was employed as a truck driver and although Tim blames his father for the divorce, Donald was ever-present during his son’s childhood.¹⁷⁶ While his family situation certainly was not ideal, the Hardaway’s were middle –class and never seemed to be in financial need.

¹⁶⁹ John Albert Torres, *Hakeem Olajuwon: Star Center*, (Enslow Publishers, Inc: New Jersey, 1997), 16.

¹⁷⁰ Torres, *Hakeem Olajuwon*, 17.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁷³ Bert Rosenthal, *Tim Hardaway: Star Guard*, (Enslow Publishers, Inc: New Jersey, 2001), 21.

¹⁷⁴ Rosenthal, *Tim Hardaway*, 21.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

18. **Scottie Pippen** (1993/1994-1995/1996): Chicago Bulls forward Scottie Pippen was raised in Hamburg, Ark., a town of slightly more than 3,000 people.¹⁷⁷ Hamburg is described as a peaceful town that consisted of two factories and numerous farm families.¹⁷⁸ Although Scottie had eleven siblings, his father was steadily employed and his mother was able to care for the children.¹⁷⁹ Most importantly, Scottie states that there was “always something to eat”.¹⁸⁰ Even after his father suffered a stroke, Scottie only had to contribute by completing common household chores.¹⁸¹ The remainder of his time was dedicated to his athletic pursuits, including football and basketball.¹⁸²
19. **Anfernee “Penny” Hardaway** (1994/1995-1995/1996): New York Knicks guard Anfernee “Penny” Hardaway grew up in a single-parent household in Memphis, Tennessee.¹⁸³ Penny spent the majority of his time with his grandmother, as his mother worked long hours to help support the family.¹⁸⁴ Hardaway was also forced to work at a local market as a young child, since his family was facing significant financial troubles.¹⁸⁵

¹⁷⁷ Robert Schnakenberg, *Scottie Pippen: Reluctant Superstar*, (Lerner Publications Company: Minneapolis, 1997), 13.

¹⁷⁸ Schnakenberg, *Scottie Pippen*, 13.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ Staff of Beckett Publications, *Anfernee Hardaway*, House of Collectibles: New York, 1996.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

20. **David Robinson** (1990/1991-1991/1992, 1994/1995-1995/1996): San Antonio

Spurs Center David Robinson was born into a naval family that traveled throughout the country during his childhood.¹⁸⁶ David's father, Ambrose, operated sonar on the *U.S.S. Van Voorhis* and his mother, Freda, dedicated the majority of her time to raising her children.¹⁸⁷ The Robinson's were financially stable and spoiled David, who was often bought expensive luxuries that he rarely used.¹⁸⁸ More importantly, Ambrose and Freda were caring and involved parents that instilled the value of education in their son.¹⁸⁹ As a result, David developed into an academically, musically, and athletically gifted individual who continues to serve as an excellent role model for American youths.

21. **Latrell Sprewell** (1993/1994): Minnesota Timberwolves guard Latrell Sprewell

grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in an extremely close-knit family.¹⁹⁰ Contrary to his public persona, Sprewell states that he learned to be a respectful and polite individual from his parents, who were highly involved in his upbringing.¹⁹¹ Consequently, Sprewell claims that his parents and grandparents were the most influential people in his early life.¹⁹² Though there is limited information on former star's childhood, it appears that his upbringing was quite positive.

¹⁸⁶ Steve Hubbard, *David Robinson*, (Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI. 1996), 12.

¹⁸⁷ Hubbard, *David Robinson*, 12.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁹⁰ Michael J. Pellowski, *Super Sports Star: Latrell Sprewell*, (Enslow Publishers, Inc: New Jersey, 2002), 12.

¹⁹¹ Pellowski, *Super Sports Star*, 12.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 12.

22. **Clyde Drexler** (1991/1992): Houston Rockets forward Clyde Drexler was born into a large, middle-class family in New Orleans, Louisiana.¹⁹³ Clyde's parents divorced when he was three years and his mother, Eunice, remarried shortly afterwards.¹⁹⁴ The family relocated to Houston, Texas, where Eunice opened a family restaurant and his step-father, Manual, worked as a trained butcher.¹⁹⁵ As Jack McCallum observed in *Sports Illustrated*, "when Clyde went to the University of Houston, he wasn't escaping from anything, didn't feel angry or trapped, and never thought he had to become a professional athlete to be a success."¹⁹⁶ Clyde and his siblings always had clothes, food to eat, and a safe neighborhood to play.¹⁹⁷ In fact, Drexler describes his section of Houston as middle-class.¹⁹⁸

23. **Charles Barkley** (1987/1988-1990/1991, 1992/1993): Former NBA forward Charles Barkley was raised by a single-mother in Leeds, Alabama.¹⁹⁹ Charles parents, Frank Barkley and Charcey Mae Glenn, were married a month after graduating high school.²⁰⁰ Charles was born roughly one year after the marriage, but Frank left thirteen months after the birth.²⁰¹ Charcey Mae describes herself as a "spoiled rotten" child, which implies that the family had some level of financial

¹⁹³ Clyde Drexler with Kenny Eggers, *Clyde the Glide*, (Sports Publishing, LLC: United States, 2004), 9.

¹⁹⁴ Drexler, *Clyde the Glide*, 10.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁹⁶ Mark Kram. *Clyde Drexler: Black Biography*. <http://www.answers.com/topic/clyde-drexler>. Accessed 02/11/08.

¹⁹⁷ Clyde Drexler with Kenny Eggers, *Clyde the Glide*, (Sports Publishing, LLC: United States, 2004), 11.

¹⁹⁸ Drexler, *Clyde the Glide*, 10.

¹⁹⁹ Charles Barkley and Roy S. Johnson, *Outrageous: The Fine Life and Flagrant Good Times of Basketball's Irresistible Force*, (Simon & Schuster: New York, 1992), 66.

²⁰⁰ Barkley, *Outrageous*, 67.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

stability.²⁰² Following the divorce, Charles' mother was forced to return to her parents' home her lack of income.²⁰³ Adolphus Edwards, Charcey Mae's step-father, soon became the most important male figure in Charles' life.²⁰⁴ Charles states that the community in which he spent his early years was clean and safe.²⁰⁵ Moreover, he was prevented from hanging out with "wrong crowd" because everyone knew and protected one another's children.²⁰⁶ Even though the family was far from wealthy, Charles claims that he "never went hungry" and that he was certainly "never in need".²⁰⁷

24. Earvin "Magic" Johnson (1987/1988-1990/1991): Los Angeles Lakers guard

Earvin "Magic" Johnson grew up as one of nine children in a middle-class, Lansing, Michigan family.²⁰⁸ He states that his upbringing was the type that many worry is rare today, as he had "two great parents" and "food on the table".²⁰⁹ Magic's father earned an "excellent" wage as General Motors employee and held a second job, which allowed his mother to work part-time and care for the children.²¹⁰ Additionally, Lansing was hardly a difficult place to raise a family. The city was full of "large, beautiful homes" and adults were known to carefully watch all of local children.²¹¹ Although Magic occasionally worked

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ Earvin "Magic" Johnson with William Novak, *My Life: Earvin "Magic" Johnson*, (Random House: New York, 1992), 3.

²⁰⁹ Johnson, *My Life*, 3.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

part-time jobs, such as raking leaves or cleaning offices, money was never an issue for the Johnson's.²¹²⁺

25. **Patrick Ewing** (1989/1990): New York Knicks center Patrick Ewing arrived in the United States from Jamaica when he was 11 years old.²¹³ The family faced financial problems when they initially arrived in Cambridge, MA, as Patrick's parents had difficulty finding employment.²¹⁴ In fact, Patrick was forced to remain in Jamaica with his seven siblings for four years while his parents saved money in Massachusetts.²¹⁵

VI. Results

After a careful analysis of the All-NBA First-Team players over the last twenty seasons, one must conclude that poor African Americans are not overrepresented in the National Basketball Association. Of the twenty-five African American NBA players selected, approximately 68 percent (17/25) can safely be described as having a middle-class background (See Appendices 2 & 3). Many of these athletes' parents held traditional, middle-class American jobs, such as factory-workers, school-teachers, military-officers, and business-owners. This is in stark contrast to the position of the academics previously cited, who believe that most African American professional athletes come from lowly origins. Though many of these occupations by no means place families into the elite financial sector of American society, they certainly do allow for an income above the stipulated poverty threshold of \$17,000 to \$24,000 per year for every

²¹² *Ibid.*

²¹³ Don Sperling, *Patrick Ewing: Standing Tall*, (NBA Entertainment, Inc, 1993).

²¹⁴ Sperling *Patrick Ewing*, 1993.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

household. Conversely, it can be concluded that only 20 percent (5/25) of the players came from true, abject poverty. Only one player, Anfernee Hardaway, explicitly mentions having to work as a child and only Amare Stoudomire entered the NBA before college strictly because of his family's financial situation. Comparatively, 12 percent (3/25) All-NBA First-Team players were raised in elite and affluent families. The families' of Grant Hill, Jason Kidd and Kobe Bryant all likely had incomes in upper stratum of American society. Surprisingly, this percentage is only slightly lower than the percentage of players that were raised in families that were likely below the poverty line.

These results prove that the theses presented by academics David K. Wiggins, Stanley D. Eitzen, and John C. Gatson are markedly flawed. The percentage of black All-NBA First-Team players that came from impoverished households is no different from the poverty rate of the large African American community. Because over three-quarters of these athletes came from financially stable homes, it is incorrect to assume that the majority of black athletes play sports in the hope of escaping the ghetto. This erroneous conclusion is not based on statistical evidence, but the belief that most African Americans are relegated to urban poverty. Coming from such backgrounds, it is implied, the best one can hope for is a lucrative career in sports or entertainment. Not only does this fallacy classify all African Americans as poor and indigent, but it completely ignores the hundreds of thousands that work as doctors, lawyers, and professors.

VII. Causes

With endless evidence that disproves the assumption that underlies the existing hypothesis, one must question how such a misguided idea can become so ubiquitous. In "The Poor Black and the Liberal Press: With Friends like These...", Martin Gilens writes

the American media is chiefly to blame for wrongly associating blacks with poverty.²¹⁶ Gilens states that between 1988 and 1992, 65 percent of the poor people shown on major network news broadcasts and 62 percent illustrated in the four major periodicals were black.²¹⁷ Additionally, every individual depicted was black in articles that used the term underclass. In reality, an average of only 29 percent of African Americans were considered impoverished by the federal government during this time period.²¹⁸ Although the poverty rate among African Americans in 2006 was 12.6 percentage points higher than Caucasians, there were far more whites living in poverty than blacks and this small difference pales in comparison to the disparity in media coverage.²¹⁹

Because Americans look to these sources for reliable information, public perception is directly influenced by the news media's portrayal of black poverty. Consequently, longstanding stereotypes of African Americans as lazy and helpless are reinforced. Such beliefs span countless decades, as Europeans once promoted an intellectually-based racial hierarchy in order to justify the subordination of Africans.²²⁰ Because blacks were perceived as being primitive, unintelligent and violent, it was alleged to be the white man's burden to protect and civilize them.²²¹ Eventually, Americans applied these stereotypes to slaves in order to place a moral rationale on a clearly unjust practice. These racist ideals have a profound effect on society, as even

²¹⁶ Martin Gilens. "The Poor Black and the Liberal Press: With Friends like These..." in *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Anti-Poverty Policy*. (University of Chicago Press, 1999).

²¹⁷ Gilens, "The Poor Black and the Liberal Press", 1999.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ United States Census Bureau, *Health, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2006*, U.S. Department of Commerce, Accessed 03/12/2008.

²²⁰ Ronald E. Hall, "The Ball Curve: Calculated Racism and the Stereotype of the African American Male", *Journal of Black Studies*, V. 32, N. 1, 3 *Jstor*.

²²¹ Hall, "The Ball Curve", 3.

those who do not subscribe to them may accept some aspect as true.²²² A century after the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, these stereotypes are still used to manipulate public opinion. For instance, President Ronald Reagan frequently played off of the lazy and dumb black belief in his promotion of the welfare queen stereotype.²²³

The professional sports world has become an obvious target for these racist ideals over recent decades, since the number of African Americans on NBA and NFL rosters began to rapidly expand. Unrepresentative figures, like Adam “Pacman” Jones and Michael Vick, have become the poster-boys for black athletes, overshadowing the praiseworthy acts of countless others. The November 19, 2004 NBA riot in Detroit also brought negative attention to the NBA, making the ghetto ballplayer stereotype even more socially acceptable. Rather than being viewed as exceptions, these individuals are somehow perceived to represent the typical black athlete. When this issue is combined with the promotion of stereotypes by the government and the media, it is quite easy to understand why academics recognize the poor black myth as factually accurate.

VIII. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that the contemporary scholarship on the topic of African American upward social mobility through sports is not based careful research or empirical evidence, but on outdated stereotypes and baseless assumptions. The scholars that produced these hypotheses did not attempt to analyze readily available information regarding poverty rates in the African American community and certainly did not consider the socio-economic background of current black athletes. Instead, unjustified arguments were created to rationalize the stereotypical view of African Americans as

²²² *Ibid.*, 3.

²²³ “Dethroning the Welfare Queen: The Rhetoric of Reform”, *Harvard Law Review*, June 1994, V. 107, N. 8, *Jstor*.

hopelessly impoverished. Rather than analyzing the complexity of African American success in sports, Eitzen, Wiggins and many others have looked for an easy explanation. When statistics contradict their rationale, they are merely disregarded. Such scholarship does not further the discussion of the topic, but simply reinforces inaccurate myths and racist beliefs. In actuality, the promotion of such horrific stereotypes does far more harm to the African American community than an unsubstantiated overreliance on sports possibly could.

Appendix 1: First Team All-NBA Players²²⁴2006-2007

Kobe Bryant, LA Lakers
 Dirk Nowitzki, Dallas
 Tim Duncan, San Antonio
 Amare Stoudomire, Phoenix
 Steve Nash, Phoenix

2005-2006

LeBron James, Cleveland
 Dirk Nowitzki, Dallas
 Shaquille O'Neal, Miami
 Kobe Bryant, LA Lakers
 Steve Nash, Phoenix

2004-2005

Tim Duncan, San Antonio
 Dirk Nowitzki, Dallas
 Shaquille O'Neal, Miami
 Allen Iverson, Philadelphia
 Steve Nash, Phoenix

2003-2004

Kevin Garnett, Minnesota
 Tim Duncan, San Antonio
 Shaquille O'Neal, LA Lakers
 Kobe Bryant, LA Lakers
 Jason Kidd, New Jersey

2002-2003

Tim Duncan, San Antonio
 Kevin Garnett, Minnesota
 Shaquille O'Neal, LA Lakers
 Kobe Bryant, LA Lakers
 Tracy McGrady, Orlando

2001-2002

Tim Duncan, San Antonio
 Tracy McGrady, Orlando
 Shaquille O'Neal, LA Lakers
 Jason Kidd, New Jersey
 Kobe Bryant, LA Lakers

²²⁴ National Basketball Association, All-NBA Teams, http://www.nba.com/history/awards_allnba.html, Accessed: 10/13/2007.

2000-2001

Tim Duncan, San Antonio
Chris Webber, Sacramento
Shaquille O'Neal, L.A. Lakers
Allen Iverson, Philadelphia
Jason Kidd, Phoenix

1999-2000

Tim Duncan, San Antonio
Kevin Garnett, Minnesota
Shaquille O'Neal, LA Lakers
Jason Kidd, Phoenix
Gary Payton, Seattle

1998-1999

Karl Malone, Utah
Tim Duncan, San Antonio
Alonzo Mourning, Miami
Allen Iverson, Philadelphia
Jason Kidd, Phoenix

1997-1998

Karl Malone, Utah
Tim Duncan, San Antonio
Shaquille O'Neal, LA Lakers
Michael Jordan, Chicago
Gary Payton, Seattle

1996-1997

Karl Malone, Utah
Grant Hill, Detroit
Hakeem Olajuwon, Houston
Michael Jordan, Chicago
Tim Hardaway, Miami

1995-1996

Scottie Pippen, Chicago
Karl Malone, Utah
David Robinson, San Antonio
Michael Jordan, Chicago
Anfernee Hardaway, Orlando

1994-1995

Karl Malone, Utah
Scottie Pippen, Chicago

David Robinson, San Antonio
John Stockton, Utah
Anfernee Hardaway, Orlando

1993-1994

Scottie Pippen, Chicago
Karl Malone, Utah
Hakeem Olajuwon, Houston
John Stockton, Utah
Latrell Sprewell, Golden State

1992-1993

Charles Barkley, Phoenix
Karl Malone, Utah
Hakeem Olajuwon, Houston
Michael Jordan, Chicago
Mark Price, Cleveland

1991-1992

Karl Malone, Utah
Chris Mullin, Golden State
David Robinson, San Antonio
Michael Jordan, Chicago
Clyde Drexler, Portland

1990-1991

Karl Malone, Utah
Charles Barkley, Philadelphia
David Robinson, San Antonio
Michael Jordan, Chicago
Magic Johnson, LA Lakers

1989-1990

Karl Malone, Utah
Charles Barkley, Philadelphia
Patrick Ewing, New York
Magic Johnson, LA Lakers
Michael Jordan, Chicago

1988-1989

Karl Malone, Utah
Charles Barkley, Philadelphia
Hakeem Olajuwon, Houston
Magic Johnson, LA Lakers
Michael Jordan, Chicago

1987-1988

Larry Bird, Boston

Charles Barkley, Philadelphia

Hakeem Olajuwon, Houston

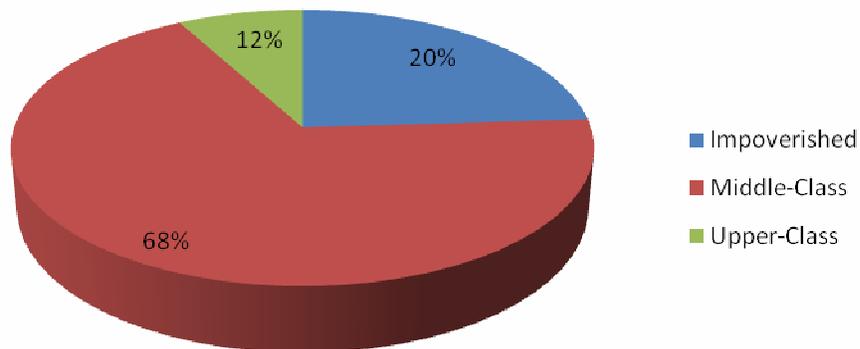
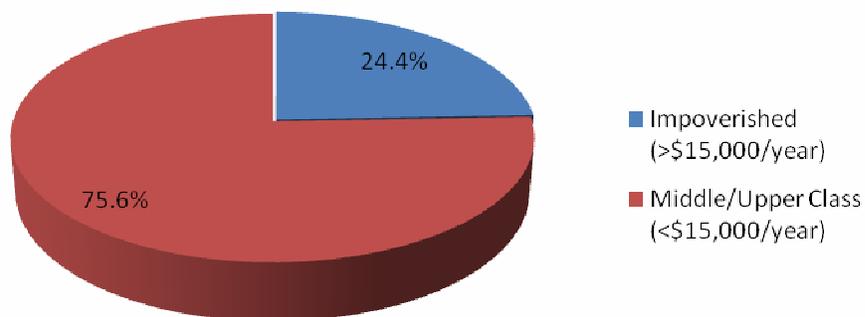
Michael Jordan, Chicago

Magic Johnson, LA Lakers

Appendix 2: Socio-Economic Background Hard Data

Impoverished (5)	Middle-Class (17)	Upper-Class (3)
Amare Stoudomire	Tim Duncan	Kobe Bryant
Allen Iverson	LeBron James	Grant Hill
Karl Malone	Shaquille O'Neal	Jason Kidd
"Penny" Hardaway	Kevin Garnett	
Patrick Ewing	Tracy McGrady	
	Alonzo Mourning	
	Chris Webber	
	Gary Payton	
	Michael Jordan	
	Hakeem Olajuwon	
	Tim Hardaway	
	Scottie Pippen	
	David Robinson	
	Latrell Sprewell	
	Clyde Drexler	
	Charles Barkley	
	"Magic" Johnson	

Appendix 3: Socio-Economic Background Charts

All-NBA First Teams (1987/1988-2007/2008)African American Community: 2006²²⁵

²²⁵ United States Census Bureau, *Health, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2006*, U.S. Department of Commerce, Accessed 03/12/2008.

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